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ABSTRACT

People involved in debate often encounter apocalyptic appeals but seldom look at how these arguments affect debate beyond their ability to influence winning. Debaters use nuclear war apocalyptism, for example, by capitalizing on the human desire to sustain its own story, by appealing to the universal drive for control and power inside all humans, and by using threat and rescue. Students have much to gain from participating in debate. They sharpen and develop critical thinking and decision making skills; they learn to be aware of more sophisticated attempts at persuasion; and they learn how source and personal credibility, logic, evidence, and criteria of judgment can affect specific decisions. Debate, used properly, is a method of decision making that provides for the rigorous examination and testing of evidence and inferences in the give and take of informed controversy. Abusing debate with apocalyptism, however, can reduce the activity to simple game playing and psychological manipulation. Apocalyptism negatively affects debate by reducing the emphasis on logos and increasing the dependence on pathos, overemphasizing emotional appeals. The harm that apocalyptism brings, however, does not preclude its having redeeming value. Apocalyptism can actually serve effectively as a tool to counter apocalyptism. By understanding how apocalyptism works, a student or coach can more appropriately respond to such attempts at manipulation. (Nineteen references are listed.) (PRA)

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# The Negative Effects of Using Apocalyptism on Debate

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Paper presented to the 1991 Speech Communication Association Convention in Atlanta, GA.

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SCA Paper

# The Negative Effects of Using Apocalyptism on Debate

People involved with debate often encounter apocalyptic appeals but seldom look at how these arguments affect debate beyond their abilities to influence winning. What happens to debate when competitors depend on apocalyptism for their persuasive force or do not understand the mechanism behind the argument? Rather than explaining the mechanics of apocalyptic appeals, in this paper I focus on defining some common purposes of debate, observing whether or not using apocalyptic persuasion contributes to these purposes, and finally concluding whether or not apocalyptism curses or enhances debate as a whole.

Before getting into the meat of this discussion, let me define a few key terms and ideas. These definitions do not come from any one text, but will work to explain my understanding of these concepts. The concept of apocalyptism includes a wide range of persuasive appeals and usually implies some grand scale tragedy reaching beyond the scope of the immediate activity involving the rhetoric. Originally derived from the Bible, apocalyptism also carries a tone of finality, judgment, and urgency. The editors, William Harmon and Hugh Holman of A Handbook to Literature, write "Apocalyptic appeals often have the character of imminent

catastrophe . . . are likely to be grandiose or unrestrained and wild, and often suggest final judgment" (32). Apocalyptism in this way is a form of psychological manipulation. Within a debate round, a competitor or judge may find apocalyptic appeals ranging from the most common nuclear war scenario to the most unique deforestation hypothesis. Most of the evidence and research done in the process of writing this paper specifies apocalyptism in the form of a nuclear holocaust, but we can draw general rules from this appeal that apply to all models of apocalyptic arguments. A simple definition may not clarify the role of apocalyptism in debate; so before we look at the effects brought on by this type of persuasion, let us view an abbreviated example of how a debater uses apocalyptism.

I have already mentioned that nuclear war scenarios are the most common form of apocalyptic arguments. In the final round of the first Cross Examination Debate Association National Tournament, McCalester College used such a scenario to win the 1986 national championship. The debaters from McCalester claimed that if the United States withdrew from the United Nations, nuclear war would occur because of the decreased power of the International Atomic Energy Association. Assertively McCalester's team warned of the pending catastrophe citing evidence that claimed, "The proliferation of nuclear weapons to more countries would increase prospects of their use, risk involving the superpowers, and raise the possibility of cataclysmic nuclear

war" (Lee 242). Frank Kermode tells us in his book, The Sense of an Ending, this form of apocalyptism works on a psychological level differing from the original Biblical apocalypse; "this form of naive apocalyptism," Kermode states, "has been modified (under the pressure of great new systems of knowledge, technological and social change, of human decision itself) to a sense of ends only loosely related to the older predictive apocalypse" (27). The psychological force behind this argument works three ways: by capitalizing on the human desire to sustain our own story, by appealing to the universal drive for control and power inside all humans, and by using threat and rescue.

"Sustaining our story," simply means that we see our lives like narratives. Anthony Brandt in his essay, "Thinking about the End," found similar reasons for our obsession with how the world will end. Brandt hypothesizes:

> We live by scripts, we see our lives as stories that have beginnings, middles, and ends. In Christianity, for example, the idea of apocalypse is familiar, almost comfortable, almost desirable . . . Don't we all ascend to heaven? (25)

Brandt also remembers something that Freud taught us; he says, "Underneath one of the many stones lying around in our psyches, said Freud, is a death instinct, an entropy of the spirit, a longing for the end" (25). Brandt summarizes the primary reasons that apocalyptism has a persuasive weight referring to the television movie, The Day After:

> The Day After is a story; the apocalypse is a story. And we do two things with stories: we see them as patterns, as a way of categorizing our own lives--and we disbelieve them. Stories, after all, aren't real; they're fiction. So we have what Frank Kermode calls, 'a permanent need to live by the pattern rather than the fact': to see life as having structure as being a story that gives meaning to apparently random events, while knowing that these stories are merely stories, subject to interpretation and not necessarily true. (25)

The desire for control and power hides in most people not far from the surface. An apocalyptic appeal like the one McCalester presents allows the audience to participate in the narrative by determining the fate of the world, flames or peace. The members of the audience only have to vote negative and they would effectively save the world from the flames of nuclear war. Such participation satisfies the thirst for power and control in most people.

Lastly McCalester takes advantage of the threat and rescue aspect of the nuclear war scenario. The premise of the argument hinges on whether or not the United States would withdraw from the United Nations, and McCalester paints a gloomy picture of a nuclear holocaust if this event occurs. McCalester actually threatens the audience members with the destruction of the world as they currently know it. In the next step, McCalester offers an escape route for the audience

and rescues it by allowing the audience to simply vote negative on the ballot saying the United States should not withdraw from the United Nations. McCalester supplies a threat capitalizing on fear and then a quick and easy solution. Because this kind of appeal works psychologically, most if not all audiences succumb to its effective persuasive weight. This universal appeal maximizes the orator's persuasive effect by allowing him or her to use one argument with a number of audiences without much audience analysis needed. This particular argument certainly maximized McCalester's efforts, earning them a national title.

Now that we know what we may encounter as apocalyptism and have an idea of how these appeals work, we can examine their effect on the quality of debate by deducing some general goals and purposes that debate supposedly meets. Reasons for becoming involved in debate vary from person to person making it difficult to define debate's purpose. I will keep to the educational goals and premises. Generally schools of thought on why people become involved in debate divide into two streams. The pedagogical and the theoretical schools have separate foci; the pedagogical school concentrates on what students take away from the activity while the theoretical school looks at what the argumentation scholar learns during the activity for the activity's sake. I choose here to limit this inquiry only to the pedagogical purposes of debate.

Thomas McClain, speaking for the educationally-minded students of pedagogy, uses Douglas Ehninger's and Wayne

Brockeridge's Decision by Debate to help him articulate the purposes or "premises" of debate. The three premises for debate listed by McClain include:

> 1. The end and method of debate are critical--the judgment is critical because it is reflective and the method is critical because it is self-regulative.
>
> 2. Debate is a mode of investigation rather than propagation. Given a choice the debater always chooses truth at the expense of victory.
>
> 3. Debate is a cooperative rather than competitive enterprise. Conflict occurs at the level of means. Debaters co-operatively seek the best resolution of problems. Debate is used for constructive, not destructive means. (203)

What should the student gain from participating in debate? A student sharpens and develops critical thinking and decision making skills. Cori Dauber, professor at University of Pittsburgh, agrees; Dauber states, "Whatever else academic debate teaches, it empowers our students and ourselves, in that it proves to them they ought not be intimidated by rhetoric of expertise surrounding questions of policy" (206). Realizing that Professor Dauber's statement implies policy debate, I expand from her idea and add that debate also teaches all participants not to be intimidated by value-laden decisions. Furthermore debate teaches individuals to be aware of more sophisticated attempts at persuasion. Debate teaches

how source and personal credibility, logic, evidence, and criteria of judgment can affect specific decisions. Dauber adds:

> Whether the main benefit of participation in debate is seen as pedagogical (what the students gain from being in the activity) or theoretical (what the argument scholar derives from debate as laboratory) its purpose goes beyond itself. Succeeding in debate, in other words, merely so one can succeed in debate, is an empty goal. (206)

Ultimately Thomas McClain attempts to speak for all speech and debate educators when he says:

> Those of us who teach courses in Argumentation and Debate and/or coach co-curricular or extra-curricular interscholastic debate do so because we are committed to a method of decision-making that provides for the rigorous examination and testing of evidence and inferences in the give-and-take of informed controversy. We believe that the health of a democratic society depends upon an informed electorate. (203)

When using debate properly, students and coaches usually surpass these goals. However, abusing debate can reduce the activity to simple game playing and psychological manipulation. Apocalyptism can cause debate to drop to such a level. However, introducing apocalyptism and teaching our students to recognize and deal with such appeals can also

allow them to make more sophisticated responses to appeals made by the government, activists, sales-people, or even the clergy. However, since apocalyptism works on the psychological level capitalizing more on pathos then logos, it creates a need for a more developed understanding of rhetoric, narrative power, and metaphor. Like any sophisticated tool it requires some expertise and understanding to apply it in the most effective and productive manner. In this sense a purpose of debate is to teach critical-thinking skills. Dauber does caution us by saying that "This implies an obligation to use these abilities responsibly . . . In other words, the ability to command sophisticated lines of argument should be used to facilitate open debate" (206).

How does apocalyptism reduce debate to pathetic appeals and manipulation? We already know that the words "nuclear war" strike fear into most human beings. The apocalypse appearing in the form of a mushroom cloud has become known to everyone. This event carries such emotionally charged imagery that it persuades the audience to act to overt the apocalypse anyway it can. Why is the apocalypse or at least our model of nuclear war so engraved in our minds? We are the nuclear society. Only in the past fifty years have people possessed the power to destroy the earth. Before the bombing of Hiroshima, the apocalypse manifested itself in Haley's comet, God's wrath, or the fate of the sun; human beings did not feel responsible for bringing about the apocalypse. The horrific destructive power displayed at Hiroshima has burned the image

into our minds. The image has become frozen in time, waiting to be called out of subconsciousness. It has become what Thomas Kane in "Rhetorical Histories and Arms Negotiations" calls a "rhetorical event."

Kane explains the meaning of "rhetorical event" by writing:

> An historical event has the potential to become rhetorical when it either violates or affirms in some dramatic way those things culture believes about itself as a collective public. Functioning much like a metaphor, the rhetorical event provides a frame of reference and becomes the basis for a persuasive appeal. Arguments may be structured around the implied meaning of the event itself, a meaning understood collectively as a composite of shared reactions. (144)

For instance Kane gives the example of how the bombing of Pearl Harbor was used as a rhetorical event to justify prejudice against the Japanese. Kane commands that "the event has such emotional meaning that forty-six years later the catastrophe still serves as a guide for understanding modern times" (144). Breaking down this claim to several key phrases we develop a case for how apocalyptism can affect debate, reducing the emphasis of logos and increasing the dependence on pathos. Kane stresses the fact that the rhetorical events must carry significant emotional meaning. The bomb carries more emotional baggage than most of us would like to admit.

G. Thomas Goodnight quotes Robert Hutchins, former president of the University of Chicago, who in 1946 said, "There is only one subject of really fundamental importance . . . that is the atomic bomb. Although it is not a cheerful subject, we must consider it, for the issue is that of survival, to which all other issues are secondary" (qtd in Goodnight 141).

Another analogous situation exists in the legal arena to which many people look for direction in debate. A rule exists against the use of overly graphic pictures as evidence. The theory behind this rule claims that the graphic pictures carry more prejudicial weight than probative value thus destroying the value and accuracy in the decision made by the jury, the audience. The image of a nuclear war-devastated earth surpasses any image of murder victims and affects audiences, in this case, judges similarly. Law theorists find once a prosecutor has identified the defendant as the cause of the terrible image, the jury's emotions fill in the rest of the story and cannot logically reason without the picture's influence. Since a premise for debate originates in its non-biased decision-making ability, debate loses its value once apocalyptism finds its way into a round unless the premises are more closely examined. However, apocalyptism because it works on fear and desire discourages the close examination of the premises. Effectively the image converts debate from a reasoning decision-making process into an act of manipulation.

Stephen O'Leary in his article entitled "The Planet of the Apes: The Fable of the Hundredth Monkey in Anti-Nuclear

Discourse" gives us another way to understand how apocalyptism ruins the logical progression of debate by overemphasizing emotional appeals. In this essay O'Leary explains how the anti-nuclear movement uses as a last resort irrational and emotional pleas to persuade its audience. These pleas, used by the anti-nuclear movement, work psychologically on the same principles that apocalyptic appeals do. The urgency of their case radiates from the burdensome responsibility that nuclear weapons put on people. "The Fable of the Hundredth Monkey" claims that once a magic number of people know a fact that knowledge becomes instinctual for all people. Anti-nuclear activists and some new age philosophers use this myth to motivate the spread of their stories. If these parties can get their stories to enough people then at some "saturation" point all people will know the story and be persuaded to the "truth." This myth gives the movements hope when everything else fails. The hope that is developed, however, is based in fiction not rational reasoning.

The activists create fear by spreading tragic accounts of events and trouble that nuclear technology brings; the hope gives the audience an escape from its fear. O'Leary quotes Kenneth Keyes justifying his anti-nuclear book; Keyes states, "It tells us how to stay alive!" (qtd in O'Leary 25). "The Hundredth Monkey" succeeds, as O'Leary puts it, "insofar as it does succeed for certain audiences, by offering hope to those in the anti-nuclear movement that a breakthrough of some sort is possible in the face of the breakdown of rational argument"

(27). In this manner "The Hundredth Monkey" functions like the transcendence step or rescue step in most nuclear war or apocalyptic scenarios by providing hope in spite of reason or logic. O'Leary supports this conclusion by writing:

> The sense of possibility that the fable offers is not based on 'rational,' empirical analysis of the likelihood of change, instead the fable offers a narrative framework within which the reader or hearer can find a place, a 'role in the unfolding drama.' (27-8)

By fulfilling a rhetorical need for hope "The Hundredth Monkey" effectively convinces an audience to suspend their criticism and reason. Apocalyptism also works by convincing an audience to stop reasoning by using a threat then rescuing the audience by giving them a way to escape. This effect renders the logos behind debate meaningless. More importantly, though, it directly contradicts the main goal of competitive forensics, to develop critical thinking and open debate. Apocalyptism targets critical thinking and seeks to eliminate it to persuade the audience void of reason making them vulnerable to manipulation.

A pure theorist or someone involved in debate simply for fun may question, "what harm comes from the suspension of reason during debate?" Debate may seem to suffer little from the misuse of apocalyptism in the eyes of the theorist, but that damage may be more severe to the pedagogical value of

debate. We must be aware that apocalyptism can hurt the pedagogical value of debate for the following reasons:

1. Apocalyptism works on the psychological level, appealing to universal motivations and desires in mankind such as fear and power.
2. Because apocalyptism works psychologically, it also seeks to suspend the reason of its audience shifting the mechanism of persuasion from logos to pathos.
3. The prejudicial weight of apocalyptism outweighs its probative value. Once again this function damages the unbiased decision-making skills of its audience by conjuring horrible images of the end.
4. The apocalyptic appeal behaves like a rhetorical event drawing on deep seated emotion that lies inside individual people due to some catastrophe or fear that now acts to order the lives of those individuals.

Due to these behaviors, apocalyptism works against the primary premises of debate that we defined earlier.

The harm that apocalyptism brings does not preclude that it cannot have a redeeming value. Apocalyptism can actually serve effectively as a tool to counter apocalyptism. When used effectively debaters experience great success, which can lead to the dependent and proliferated use of apocalyptism. The warning that accompanies this success heralds a potential dependence and thoughtless application of this winning

argument. By understanding how apocalyptism works, a student or a coach can more appropriately respond to such attempts at manipulation; not only increasing their success rates but improving their knowledge of an important rhetorical mechanism. As judges we can bring this enlightenment about by questioning the premises and logic structures behind the apocalyptic appeals on the ballot. This awareness only strengthens our reason and defenses when orators ask us to stop reasoning. As well, since apocalyptism like McCalester's demand higher sophisticated replies; the use of apocalyptism may also bring debate to another intellectual level. Finally, if we intend to learn critical thinking in debate that we can apply in other spheres, exposure to apocalyptism in debate can help us deal with this sort of persuasion when politicians, activists, and sales people use it to persuade us. Today, we see apocalyptism being used more often because of the rapid change around us causing us to feel less secure about the future and uncomfortable about the present. We may encounter apocalyptism somewhere when the outcome of the decision means more than the result of a debate, making our exposure to apocalyptism truly valuable.

Measured against the pedagogical motivations behind debate our findings point to more negative effects than positive for the use of apocalyptism in debate. However, negative effects now do not imply that apocalyptism will always bring a sour taste to the pedagogical participant in forensics. By continuing research into the mechanisms that

drive apocalyptism, students may come to grips with a better understanding of the apocalyptic world around them. Through continued coaching and coaching awareness of how apocalyptism can affect debate, educators may better ready their students for the appeals that await them in debate and the "real world." An important note to close on comes from Thomas McClain's criticism of the Reagan/Dukakis presidential debates, "The tenor of the presidential debates demonstrated that winning or victory was the overriding preoccupation of the candidates and their advisers" (203). As long as the desire to win governs the motivation behind coaching and competing in debate, the effects of manipulation like apocalyptism will always be negative in the long run.

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Table 1

News Editing Lecture Attitude Test

Please fill in the number that corresponds most closely with your opinion.

| strongly agree | slightly agree | neutral | slightly disagree | strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

1. I am comfortable with the size of my class. 1.6
2. I am pleased with the organization of this class in which a professor teaches the lecture and an editor teaches the lab. 2.5
3. The content covered in the lecture correlated with what I practiced in the lab. 3.1
4. The teaching method is appropriate to the subject. 1.9
5. The subject matter is taught at my level of comprehension. 1.5
6. There is enough variety in this course to hold my interest. 2.1
7. The equipment was adequate for the course content. 3
8. I receive enough individual attention to suit my needs. 1.8
9. I am pleased with the instructor's knowledge of the subject. 2.1
10. I receive enough instruction from my teacher before she gives me an assignment. 2.1
11. I receive enough feedback from my teacher after my assignment is completed. 2
12. The teacher stimulated interest in continuing the subjects taught in the class outside of the class. 2.3
13. I believe that the textbook is appropriate for this course. 1.7
14. I believe that the workbook is appropriate for this course. 2.4
15. I compare this course favorably with other journalism courses taught by one instructor. 2.1
16. This course provided a meaningful learning experience for me. 2.1

Comments and suggestions:

Table 2

News Editing Laboratory Attitude Test

Please fill in the number that corresponds most closely with your opinion.

| strongly agree | slightly agree | neutral | slightly disagree | strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

1. I am pleased with the size of five people in my lab. 1.8
2. I am pleased with the frequency in which we met of five times during the semester. 3.5
3. I am pleased that the lab time was approximately two hours per meeting. 2.5
4. I am pleased that stories that I edited appeared in the Shorthorn newspaper. (only seven students answered this.) 3.3
5. The equipment was adequate for the lab. 3.4
6. The lab provided a meaningful learning experience for me. 2.5
7. I received enough individual attention to suit my needs. 2.5
8. I am pleased with the instructor's knowledge of the subject. 1.4
9. The teaching method is appropriate to the subject. 2.2
10. I receive enough instruction from my teacher before he gives an assignment. 2.3
11. I receive enough feedback from my teacher after my assignment is completed. 3
12. The teacher stimulated interest in continuing the subjects taught in the class outside of the class. 2.6
13. I compare this lab favorably with other journalism courses taught by one instructor. 2.9
14. I believe that this class prepared me to practice copy editing skills after I graduate. 3.4

Comments and suggestions: